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SUBJECT: Tirana Impressions

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¶1. The following is a weekly report prepared by Embassy Tirana's local staff to provide political and economic context and insight into developments in Albania.

ALBANIA'S POLITICAL VOCABULARY: A NATIONAL SHAME

¶2. In recent weeks, the homes of Albanians were invaded via their TVs by rivers of foul language and harsh tones coming from both sides of the political spectrum. It happened gradually, day by day, person after person. It started from the very mouth of the country's Prime Minister and continued with the country's opposition leader, and it was diligently pursued by high level officials of both sides upon specific instructions from the top. The enduring shock of every single Albanian citizen, including our Embassy staff, gave birth to the idea of collecting a few choice words from the endless terminology used. Although these words have been aired over and over again for consecutive days, the very writer of these lines was so dismayed by the process that he had to leave it with only the below two paragraphs.

¶3. Terms used by PM Berisha and the ruling Democratic Party to refer to the Socialist Party and SP Chairman Edi Rama: "We will use the pincers of the law to pull out the teeth" (of the opposition), Mafiosi; leader of the cupola of Albanian Mafia; goat-head; the last castle of corruption; wife beater.

¶4. (U) Terms used by Edi Rama and others in the Socialist Party to refer to PM Berisha and members of the Democratic Party: "We will use our fist to break the teeth (of the GOA) one by one"; Greedy and ignorant; liar; rooster strutting on top of a pile manure; Albanian Duce; Stalin; tyrant; clown man; a pervert prime minister; mentally incapable; Enver Hoxha's most distinguished hunting-dog; pitiable ballot thief.

REDOUBLING EFFORTS OR ADMITTING DEFEAT?

¶5. Last week, on the grounds of combating trafficking and fighting the mafia, the Council of Ministers extended for another three years a moratorium on speedboats and small motorized vessels along Albania's coast. Following the approval of the draft, Prime Minister Berisha said that these small and fast vessels have nothing in common with tourism, but are entirely an industry of the mafia and trafficking, and if need be the ban would be "extended indefinitely as long as we remain in power." The decision to extend the moratorium for three more years has been controversial, and many critics have voiced their concerns regarding its constitutionality (claiming an infringement of human rights,) impact on tourism, and the image of Albania as a NATO member country and aspiring the EU candidate member status.

¶6. In April 2006, in an attempt to curb trafficking and improve Albania's tarnished image, the Government of Albania (GOA) approved

a three-year term ban on speed boats and other small, motorized water craft along the coastline. At the time, and despite resistance by stakeholders and the opposition, the moratorium was generally encouraged by average citizens on the grounds that it would provide the government time to build the necessary infrastructure and improve capacities to fight trafficking of human beings and smuggling of goods, and contribute in Albania's integration to Euro-Atlantic structures. The decision was also praised by foreign governments, particularly Italy, which considered the decision a positive sign. To some extent, since Albania lacked the necessary capacities and infrastructure for its coastguard to effectively patrol the entire coastline and territorial waters, it was agreed that Albania had to pay the price of a total ban on certain types of boats as it sought more liberal visa arrangements with the EU.

17. Today, more than three and one half years later, when most were expecting the moratorium to be revoked and the Albanian government to demonstrate that it was ready and prepared to fight trafficking, the government instead admitted defeat. It admits that in more than three and one half years it was not able to improve its capacities in fighting trafficking along the coast, and, furthermore that it is ready to again infringe upon the constitution and human rights of its people just to show willingness to fight trafficking. We all are aware that those measures should be temporary and do not put an end to trafficking, which has continued along other routes. It is time to address the issue once and for all, and patches here and there should be a thing of the past. The decision comes at a time when the GOA is working to meet EU requirements for visa liberalization, and has promised to achieve this by mid 2010. Let us hope that, if nothing else, the extension of the speedboat ban will serve to convince the EU to approve the visa free regime.

DEBATES OVER HIGHER EDUCATION IN ALBANIA

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18. A public and open debate has recently emerged about higher education in Albania. Topics of discussion have encompassed the Bologna process, higher education law (Law No. 9832), and the autonomy of universities. The purpose of the Bologna Process is to create a European Higher Education Area, and is based on cooperation between ministries, higher education institutions, students and staff from 46 countries, with the participation of international organizations. Albania signed the Bologna Declaration on September 18, 2003, though discussions about the process had begun in 1999. What it entailed for Albanian education was: adoption of a system of easily readable and comparable degrees; a system based on three cycles (undergraduate, post-graduate, doctorate); establishment of a system of credits; promotion of mobility for students, academics and administrative staff; consolidation of financial autonomy; implementation of three cycle systems of studies following the scheme 3+2+3 (academic years), improving recognition and accreditation of foreign diplomas, etc.

19. Despite strides made in this process, the practice of Albanian universities is actually a blend of the French higher education law, the Italian practice of 22 subjects, and of course, the Albanian context. The assortment of laws and various practices has not produced a smooth transition into a well functioning system. Nevertheless, there has been progress, and the Ministry of Education now appears serious in its commitment to addressing some of these issues.

Quote of the Week

10. "Albania was protected by chance, made by idealists and killed by politicians" - Faik Konica, one of the greatest figures of Albanian culture in the early decades of the twentieth century.